

## Press Briefing by Ari Fleischer

12:32 P.M. EDT

MR. FLEISCHER: **Let me give you a President's**

schedule today, and then I have several announcements for you and a statement by the President I'd like to read to you.

The President began with an intelligence briefing, then an FBI briefing. And then he convened a meeting of the National Security Council. The President also met for 45 minutes earlier today with the elected leadership of the Republican House and the Senate to talk about a series of actions that are pending on the Hill, including the growth and tax plan to create jobs, the importance of getting prescription drugs to senior citizens, the global HIV-AIDS initiative, energy legislation, and a number of other areas they talked about. The President also made remarks, as you know, to the 2003 National and State Teachers of the Year.

Later today the President will have lunch -- or he's actually having lunch now with the Vice President. He will also welcome Congressman Rob Hall to the White House on the occasion of the Congressman's 80th birthday. And then later today, the President will sign into law the National Amber Alert legislation. He will welcome to the White House the families of many of those cases, prominent cases where children have been missing. And later this evening, the President will meet with the President of Colombia in the Oval Office.

President Bush will also welcome Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik of Norway to the White House on May the 16th. Norway is a close ally and good friend of the United States, and the President and the Prime Minister will discuss important challenges on the global agenda, including the war on terrorism, reconstruction of Iraq, and the transatlantic relations.

I have a lengthy statement I want to read to you by the President, which will be distributed immediately after the briefing, on the release of the road map in the Middle East. This is a statement by the President:

**On March 14th, I noted the important** steps taken by the Palestinian Legislative Counsel toward the creation of an empowered, accountable office of Prime Minister. The PLC has now confirmed a new Palestinian Prime Minister and cabinet. Today the road map for peace, developed by the United States over the last several months in close cooperation with Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations, has been presented to the Israelis and to the Palestinians.

The road map represents a starting point toward achieving the vision of two states, a secure state of Israel and a viable, peaceful, democratic Palestine, that I set out on June 24, 2002. It is a framework for progress toward lasting peace and security in the Middle East. Implementing the road map will be dependent upon the good-faith efforts and contributions of both sides. The pace of progress will depend strictly on the performance of the parties.

I urge Israelis and Palestinians to work with us and with other members of the international community, and above all, directly with each other, to immediately end the violence and return to a path of peace, based on the principles and objectives outlined in my statement of June 24, 2002. Both Israelis and Palestinians have suffered from the terror and violence, and from the loss of hope and a better future of peace and security. An opportunity now exists to move forward.

The United States will do all it can to seize this opportunity. To that end, I've asked Secretary Powell to travel to the region to begin working with parties so that we may take advantage of this moment."

End of statement. That will be released in print to you immediately following the meeting.

**And, finally, yesterday, Senate Democrats** announced that they will filibuster another one of President Bush's very qualified nominees -- in this case, Texas Supreme Court Justice Priscilla Owen, who is the nominee for the 5th Circuit. Miguel Estrada has also been the subject of a Senate filibuster. They were both originally nominated on May 9, 2001, and have been waiting almost two years for a vote. Both were rated well-qualified from the American Bar Association. That is the highest possible rating that the American Bar Association gives. It is also, according to Democrats, the gold standard that they would use to judge whether nominees were qualified. Both enjoy strong bipartisan support within their states. Both have majority votes available, bipartisan, on the floor of the Senate if the obstruction were to cease.

The Senate has a constitutional responsibility to hold an up or down vote on all judicial nominees within a reasonable amount of time. But some Democrats have abandoned that responsibility in favor of partisan politics and obstructionism. The Constitution is clear: A majority is required to confirm judicial nominees. A minority of Senate Democrats are effectively changing the law with their obstructionist tactics. The President's nominees are highly-qualified and not only do they deserve a vote, they deserve to be confirmed. The President again calls on the Senate to end these obstructionist tactics and to allow a vote on these two nominees.

And with that, I'm happy to take questions. Helen.

**Q What has been the original** -- not original -- initial reaction to the road map?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, it's just been received this morning. I would allow the Israelis and the Palestinians to speak for themselves and not express their thoughts for them, they're capable of doing that. From the President's point of view, he welcomes their contributions to this, whatever ideas they have, and he looks forward to working with them on it.

The State Department can give you information about the Secretary's itinerary, future travels. It's not an immediate trip that the Secretary will be taking, but the United States, the President, and the Secretary of State will devote considerable time and energy to helping the parties to achieve peace.

**Q What does he hope to accomplish when he goes to Syria?**

MR. FLEISCHER: I would refer you directly to the State Department on it, but the message to Syria is that Syria is a terrorist country, that Syria has supported terrorists, Syria occupies a considerable portion of Lebanon through the Hezbollah, and Syria needs to reassess its role in the world. We hope that Syria, under the relatively new leadership of a relatively untested leader, will choose a different direction than it has in the past. Syria also -- it's important that they continue to receive the message that they have been receiving in regard to not harboring anybody who is trying to leave Iraq.

**Q Does the President support the idea of lifting sanctions against Iraq, vis-a-vis its status as a terrorist state?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes, and Secretary Powell discussed that up on the Hill today. Iraq no longer is a terrorist state. The chief terrorist and his cronies have been removed.

Q **How quickly can you lift** the sanctions?

MR. FLEISCHER: Through the United Nations you're asking about?

Q No, no, no, terrorist state.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's, I believe -- I don't know if that's a legislative matter or an administrative matter, so I'd have to refer you to the experts at State for that.

Q **You're saying now the President** was trying to build up support for his tax cut with the Republican leadership. Alan Greenspan was on the Hill again expressing opposition to it, saying -  
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MR. FLEISCHER: That's not what he said.

Q He said his position hasn't changed --

MR. FLEISCHER: That's correct.

Q -- since he testified the last time. The last time he was not encouraging it when it passed. Does the President --

MR. FLEISCHER: That's not a fair characterization of what the Chairman has said about the question of providing tax cuts. He has had a very nuanced statement about it, but certainly he never said he was opposed to it.

Q He's expressed that this is probably not a good time to pass a tax cut of that magnitude, is my understanding of what he said.

MR. FLEISCHER: You have to take a look at what he said in its entirety, because he has expressed his concerns about spending and he has said that tax cuts have a stimulative effect on the economy, and he has expressed support for stimulus of a nature of the tax cut, without defining specifically what should be in it. So, again, I think you have to take a look at what he said in its entirety, but that's not a fair characterization.

Q Does the President feel that his case is somewhat undercut by the Fed Chairman's position, especially since the Fed Chairman, as the President suggested he will reappoint him --

MR. FLEISCHER: No, because that's not the Fed Chairman's position, as you've expressed it. So, no.

Q **Can I go back to the road map** and Helen's question? There has already been some initial reaction. Abu Mazen, the Palestinian Prime Minister, has said he would accept it with no changes. The Israelis have suggested about a dozen changes they would like to see to the document, itself. Is the administration encouraging the Israelis to accept it as is, or are you willing to play with it a little bit to make whatever changes the Israelis want?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, now the difficult process begins again, in terms of finding a way for the parties who have differing approaches to come together. And what the President is hopeful is there's been such a changed environment because of the last several years, a new, more optimistic, more hopeful environment can take hold.

And so we received preliminary comments from the Israelis; the document has now been formally released to the Israelis. And as the President said, we welcome their contributions to the document. The Palestinians have made similar preliminary comments about it. We look forward to hearing more detailed comments.

If the current comments hold, then it's no surprise, the work will begin of trying to help the Israelis and the Palestinians to bridge their differences about the document. What's important is that they both share the outcome of the document, which is the path to peace and the path to statehood for Palestinians, and security for Israel.

Make no mistake, it will be hard work. There will be a lot of hand-holding required. The President is prepared to invest the time and the energy into it. Still, it does fundamentally come down to the two parties. But nobody would expect that the initial comments one hour after release is going to be the final comments.

Q But fair or not, there has been somewhat of a perception up until this point that the President wasn't really committed to this. Is there a -- well, not willing to send the Secretary of State to the region and show the level of commitment we're seeing now, after the war in Iraq. Is it fair to say that the success in Iraq has given Israel another level of security so that the administration would expect them to be willing to make the sacrifices that both sides are needing to make in order for this to work?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think two points; one is the biggest holdup was the fact that Yasser Arafat was still in charge of the Palestinian Authority. The administration was unequivocal; President Bush said repeatedly that the road map would be released upon a confirmation of Abu Mazen's cabinet and as reforms in the Palestinian Authority move forward. That just took place this very week. So the administration has been timely in its release of the road map.

The fact that one of the lead sponsors of violence has been removed from the scene, Saddam Hussein, is an important piece of the prospects for peace in the Middle East, but it's not the only one. Certainly, there are indigenous issues between the Israelis and the Palestinians. There are root causes of violence and historical differences between the Israelis and Palestinians that have to be resolved, that are, indeed, separate and apart from a successful completion of the war. But make no mistake, the fact that Saddam Hussein has been removed from power does remove one source of instability that paid for suicide homicide bombers to cross into Israel and take innocent lives.

Q When does the President expect to see results as the road map lays out the mutual steps that each side should take, the cracking down on militancy and freeing up of the hold that Israel has had on the Palestinian community?

MR. FLEISCHER: It's a process. And the process began this morning as the parties formally received the road map for the first time in the formal sense. From here, it will be a question now of the willingness of the parties to face a different type of future; the willingness of the Palestinians to forego violence as a way of settling disputes; the willingness of the Israelis to reach out and work with the Palestinians to resolve political disputes, land disputes, and enter into a permanent era where two states can live side-by-side. And that process will now move forward.

I'm not going to put an artificial time on any one element of that process. Certainly not today, the day the plan has just been released to them. But hopefully, today will mark the beginning of a new way of doing business between the Israelis and the Palestinians, with the release of the road map which focuses them on peaceful settlement of disputes, not violent settlement of disputes.

**Q And to follow up on Tom's question** on Greenspan's comments. He wasn't only focusing on the problem of spending. He was saying long-term deficits will impact long-term interest rates, and he said that while he has favored a dividend tax cut, he believes it's very important that there's a pay-as-you-go or discretionary spending restraint in order not to increase the deficit. And the Congressional Budget Office is saying this tax cut and the spending together will cause deficits long, far into the future. Doesn't that undermine the case of a tax cut?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the President believes very strongly that we need to reduce the deficit. His budget focuses on doing that. But the President also is very concerned about the state of the economy here and now, today, for the unemployed, for people who are looking for work and can't find it. And certainly, as unemployment still is at about a 5.8 percent level, what we've seen increasingly is people who are leaving the labor force and not even looking for work, which doesn't show up in the unemployment statistics.

The President has a lot of concern about those families, those people who want a job. And there are different issues to be approached, they're both important, about how to make sure there is no deficit. But his first focus is helping people to find a job. And he knows we can reduce the deficit over time. He also knows that the best way to reduce the deficit is to hold the line on spending. And he's very pleased that the budget resolution that was just passed does have a good, tight control over domestic discretionary spending. And the meeting the President had with congressional leaders today, they did talk about adhering to the spending discipline of the budget resolution.

**Q** So you disagree in the emphasis that Chairman Greenspan has put on get control of the deficit before you do anything on spending or taxes?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President wants to focus on growth, on creation of jobs for the American people, and on deficit reduction.

**Q And then, on the judicial nominations**, where precisely in the Constitution is the Senate required to hold an up or down vote on every judicial nominee?

MR. FLEISCHER: I said that the Constitution is clear, a majority is required to confirm judicial nominees. The Senate process has now moved to a point where it's becoming almost a matter of routine --

**Q** You said that they were required to hold an up or down vote.

MR. FLEISCHER: I said, the Constitution is clear, a majority is required to confirm --

**Q** Just prior to that, you said that they are required to hold an up or down vote.

MR. FLEISCHER: You can check the transcript, but when I cited on the Constitution, I said just what I said verbatim on the Constitution.

**Q** Ari, what would the President like to see the Israelis and the Palestinians do first, now that the road map has been presented?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President would like to see them study the road map. We'd like to see them demonstrate a willingness to work with each other to bridge the differences between their opening points of views about the road map. And he would like to see the Palestinians provide security so that homicide bombings are, indeed and in fact, stopped; a crackdown by the Palestinian Authority on those who would seek to oppose peace from within Palestinian ranks.

And the President would like to see the Israelis work with the Palestinian Authority to promote political agreements and political settlements of disputes.

Q What about settlement activity?

MR. FLEISCHER: Absolutely, the President believes that as security is improved, settlement activity must stop.

Q How much personal time will the President invest in this? And do you see an early Middle East conference?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not going to speculate too far down the line. As the President says in his statement, Secretary Powell will travel to the region shortly, so there will be any number of opportunities to have conversations. You may want to talk to the Secretary about any contacts he may have had today in the region.

The Secretary is working the phones. This is important. And this administration, this President are dedicating to helping the parties find a new way.

Q And his own time?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President?

Q Yes.

MR. FLEISCHER: Absolutely, he's going to spend considerable time on it. And I want to remind you that in the run-up to the war, in many of the meetings the President had, he always brought up the subject of Middle East peace with European leaders. And the President has invested considerable time with Arab leaders in the region, working to advance peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, which also is another hopeful sign, because there are Arab nations in the region that would like to see progress be made and are working, actually, very diligently and quietly to help achieve those goals.

Q Republicans on the Hill are talking about a variety of mechanisms or gimmicks, some might call them, to keep the size of the tax cut down to a level that can pass the Senate. Among them is making some aspects of this temporary. Would the President be prepared to accept a tax cut package that made, for example, the dividend exclusion temporary or less than 100 percent?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, there are a number of ideas that are now starting to publicly float off of Capitol Hill. I anticipate that there will be a markup in both the Ways and Means Committee and the Finance Committee next week, and so, obviously, this will come to some form of a concrete proposal prior to that. And that's one of the reason the President met today with the leadership. He'll have continued conversations. He's spoken with the leaders; many meetings take place.

And I'm not going to be able to negotiate the President's position publicly, but there are a variety of different ways when it comes to tax policy to achieve the President's goals and the President is going to work productively with the Congress to find those ways.

Q So he's open to these kinds of ideas?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not going to negotiate in public, but there are a good variety of ways to accomplish all of the objectives of the President's proposal -- including a 100-percent dividend exclusion.



**Q You talked a moment ago about the** problem of unemployment being an immediate problem and suggested that the deficit is something that would have to be dealt with a little bit further down the road. At what point does the deficit become an immediate problem? It's reaching levels that some economists say over the next year or two could even be 5 percent of GDP, which is typically a level at which other countries would be told they have a huge, major, immediate problem.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, first of all, the trend line in the deficit is that it is going down. Second of all, you have to examine what caused the deficit. And it still remains numerically and empirically the fact that the deficit has been caused by the recession that took place beginning in January of 2001 as a result of the slowdown in the economy that began in the summer of 2000, or the stock market decline, which began in March of 2000. That, combined with the September 11th attacks and the war and the subsequent spending required to fight the war and to react to September 11th, is what caused the deficit.

That is empirically the case. Even if there had been no tax cut, for example, we would still have a deficit today, without the tax cut. So first things first is what caused the deficit. And clearly, the international situation, as it increasingly improves, helps to reduce the deficit.

But the greatest factor is the economy is emerging from a recession. Nothing hurts revenue growth more than a recession. And what's particularly interesting to note is that the greatest source of revenues from the dramatic upswing in revenues in the late '90s was something that people started to refer to as the market factor. The dramatic surge in the stock market led to a dramatic surge in revenues. And so much of this was the result of factors that are now increasingly fading from the economy. We hope the deficit will react to this.

**Q** But this, again, is \$400 billion, \$500 billion an acceptable level for this economy?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, clearly, when it comes to fighting the war, whatever it took to fight the war was necessary to protect our force, to protect our troops and to achieve our objectives. The war is now -- as the President has said, the major combat operations -- the President has been told major combat operations have ended. So all these factors, the recession and the war and 9/11, have helped to drive the deficit to where it is.

**Q Ari, critics are saying that the** atmosphere for this road map would have happened earlier if President Bush would have sat down with Yasser Arafat a long time ago.

MR. FLEISCHER: No.

**Q** Why?

MR. FLEISCHER: Because Yasser Arafat was not a party to peace. Yasser Arafat was a part of the problem. I think Yasser Arafat had his chance and he walked away with it -- walked away from it when he walked away from an agreement that President Clinton worked very hard to reach. That was Yasser Arafat's moment of truth. And then the moment of truth became even worse when Yasser Arafat lied to President Bush about the Karine-A and actively worked on behalf of the terrorists, lying to the President of the United States about Palestinian support, led by Yasser Arafat, for terrorism.

**Q** But once again, the critics are saying Yasser Arafat was reaching out. The White House has said he talked to Colin Powell and talked to other people instead of President Bush. Do you think that interaction with two leaders could have helped at all in anything, resolve any type of --

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the best, most accurate way to describe Yasser Arafat's manner of reaching out was he reached out to terrorists to import weapons for the Palestinian terrorists. That's what the lesson of the Karine-A was.

**Q Another thing, on another subject.** The NRA, Charleton Heston has left. Many are wondering about a statement that was said that the assault weapons ban will not continue once it expires. The administration has said something different. How is this meshing with a group that is friend to the Bush administration?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the administration is already on record about the assault weapon ban. The President has said that he supports the current assault weapons ban, and he would support the reauthorization of the current assault weapons ban.

Q So the NRA is just out in left field then?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President approaches every issue on the merits of the issue. Sometimes he agrees with different people on different issues, but I think when it comes to virtually all the issues that have been presented, the President has strong agreement with the National Rifle Association. The President's position on the current assault weapons ban is known.

**Q Ari, tomorrow the President is going to announce** that major combat operations are over in Iraq. At what point is it appropriate criteria to meet -- to legally declare that the war with Iraq is over, and in doing so, under international law, meet requirements as an occupying force?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, number one, as the liberators of Iraq, the administration has, you should note, been releasing POWs. The administration continues to address exactly what the President promised, the security concerns, the health and the welfare concerns of the Iraqi people. All that continues.

I can't make a prediction about the legal matters, about when, from a formal, legal sense, hostilities will be deemed to be over. That will be something the President, again, gets guidance from, from the commanders in the field. So that will be driven by events on the ground, and the reaction of the commanders on the ground to those events.

Q But why isn't this the time to legally declare that it's over?

MR. FLEISCHER: Because as events are very visible, as you all have covered this morning, hostilities remain. There are pockets of resistance. There continue to be Iraqis who shoot at America's Armed Forces. It happened again in Fallajah.

**Q Can you speak to the significance of the capture of** the al Qaeda, half a dozen out of Pakistan, one believed to be responsible for perhaps the bombing of the USS Cole?

MR. FLEISCHER: It's been another strong day of Pakistani cooperation in the war against terror, with a helpful and significant capture. And the President is appreciative to President Musharraf and the Pakistani people for their continued strong efforts to fight terror.

Q Is there any information on this alleged handwritten note from Saddam Hussein in this London Arabic paper, whether it's legitimate or authentic?

MR. FLEISCHER: I have no way -- I've received no evaluations from it. You can take it for what you want.



**Q Ari, on judicial nominations, it seems** the issue is utterly gridlocked. Does the President have some ideas of how to get this thing kind of moving again, beyond just having tantrums?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President will continue to speak out and make the case. He will continue to stand strong, shoulder-to- shoulder, by his nominees, because he believes they are qualified. But if you really want to measure what's going on here, I think you have to measure the will of a bipartisan majority versus the role of a slender obstructionist minority. And that's the problem when people want to employ the 60-vote device that the Senate makes available to its members to force their ideology on a majority.

And what's happening now is that there are a few liberal Democrats who want to enforce their ideology on a bipartisan majority that can govern, that can appoint judicial nominees. There are a bipartisan majority of votes for Priscilla Owen. There are a bipartisan majority of votes for Miguel Estrada. They are being blocked and obstructed by a liberal, partisan, obstructionist minority.

**Q Why is the President giving this** speech now? What significance should we read into this?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the President is giving the speech now because of the successful operations that have been carried out, the significant accomplishments in achieving the mission, and because he wants to explain to the American people, having risked lives and treasure in pursuit of our goals in Iraq, what the present results are. And that's something that the President began with his speech to the country about, and he wants to, again, now bring it to a conclusion with a speech to the country. The war on terror will continue. Iraq was a phase in the war on terror. And the President wants to discuss all of this with the American people.

**Q Why not just declare victory?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I would urge you to listen to the President's words tomorrow night. But the President knows that while major combat operations have ended, and while the next phase has begun with the reconstruction of Iraq, there continue to be threats to the security and the safety of the American people. And he will describe that. There continues to be great progress in protecting the American people from those threats. But threats do indeed remain.

**Q Full victory, you've indicated before, I believe, would include all of the President's objectives** having been met, including finding weapons of mass destruction and rounding up all the leadership of the previous regime. Is that --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I'll let you judge the President's words tomorrow for what they represent, what topics he covers. Certainly Deputy Secretary Armitage's speech this morning about weapons of mass destruction covered much of that ground.

**Q But the President's not going all the way.**

MR. FLEISCHER: Again, I'll urge you to listen to his remarks tomorrow, and you'll form your own basis.

**Q One other thing. Do this have -- do his remarks have any legal impact whatsoever?**

MR. FLEISCHER: No, the remarks tomorrow will be -- as the President has a habit of doing -- speaking in direct, plain English to the American people, so they can understand what was at stake, what has been accomplished, and so we can all join together in saying thanks to the men and women of our Armed Forces who helped achieve this remarkable success with so little loss of life. From a legal point of view, the remarks tomorrow do not change any legal matters.

Q Getting **back to the Greenspan testimony**. Greenspan, as Terry pointed out, has said he would like to see offsets for any dividend tax cut. You all did not propose offsets. So getting back to Tom's question, do you think that his testimony today, in the way of not changing his position, has undermined you all's argument on the Hill to pass the dividend tax repeal without offsets?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I think that members of Congress always enjoy and benefit from hearing from Chairman Greenspan. They use their own independent judgments. And we are -- the President remains confident that at the end of the day a majority will be assembled in the House and the Senate to pass his proposals.

Q Does the President intend now to get -- he's obviously shown that he's -- in the last two meetings, he is getting more personally involved. Are we to see more of that, when it comes to the tax plan?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the President has long been directly and personally involved, and he will continue to be. The President met for an hour and a quarter on the Truman Balcony last night with the Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader of the Senate. Then he had the 45-minute meeting today with the elected leadership. I think you can anticipate the President will travel the country to continue to make his case. He will continue to work the phones and meet with members.

Q Did he, in either of those meetings, give the leadership of Congress some insight into whether he wants phase-ins, he would accept phase-ins --

MR. FLEISCHER: No, they didn't get into that level of detail.

Q Why not?

MR. FLEISCHER: Because it's not that type of meeting. They had a broad agenda to cover, including prescription drugs for seniors, Medicare --

Q But aren't we at the point where -- the committees about to meet, these decisions will be made soon. So when will the President tell them what he would like, how he'd like those decisions --

MR. FLEISCHER: It's all part of a process that involves the President, that involves others in the administration working directly with Chairman Thomas and Chairman Grassley, as well as the leadership. So I think you can anticipate that process will continue between now and when the markup is revealed.

Q **Two questions. One a follow on** your colloquy with Terry. Your exact words at the top were, "The Senate has a constitutional responsibility to hold an up or down vote."

Q Thank you.

Q Are you now walking yourself back from that, and saying that you didn't mean to say that? Or are you saying that there is -- are you saying that there is something in the Constitution that requires the Senate to hold an up or down vote on every judicial nomination?

MR. FLEISCHER: I said -- you're correct, I said, the Senate has a constitutional responsibility to hold an up or down vote on all judicial nominees within a reasonable time, and that's because advice and consent is the prerogative of the Senate, and it is to be given.

Q Prerogative of the Senate. They're a co-equal branch of government that interprets their own constitutional responsibility.

MR. FLEISCHER: Clearly, if the Senate made the decision that they do not want to seat anybody in the federal court system, it would be a constitutional crisis.

Q That's not the decision they're making.

MR. FLEISCHER: But there is a vacancy crisis in the Senate. It is uniquely the role of the Senate, under the Constitution, to confirm judges. And if the Senate engages in filibusters for the confirmation of judges, then clearly the nation would not be well served.

Q The question is, is there something in the Constitution that requires an up or down vote on every nomination, because as you know, there are many judicial nominations that --

MR. FLEISCHER: Only the fact that if the Senate doesn't do it, nobody else will. And so, therefore, the President calls on the Senate to exercise its constitutional prerogative to confirm his nominees.

Q But it's not in the Constitution, correct? There's nothing in the Constitution --

MR. FLEISCHER: They have a responsibility to hold an up or down vote. Nobody else, other than the Senate, per the Constitution, has that responsibility. Now, it is certainly the right of the Senate to walk away from their responsibilities. But I don't back off at all from saying that under the Constitution, the Senate has that responsibility.

Q That's different from saying they have to hold an up or down vote on every nomination --

MR. FLEISCHER: They have a responsibility to hold an up or down vote.

Q It all depends on what your definition of the word, "responsibility" is.

**Q On Iraq, the United States went to war** -- this administration went to war in Iraq for the very specific reasons that the President is very clear. One of them was weapons of mass destruction. One of them was alleged links between Saddam Hussein's regime and terrorists. A third reason which the President stated many times was that Iraq's military strength and Hussein's use of it posed a threat to its neighbors in the region. We're now, as you say, at the end of major combat operations. No significant finds of weapons of mass destruction have been found to date. No significant evidence has been found linking Saddam Hussein's regime to al Qaeda beyond what we knew at the start of this war. And Saddam Hussein's military looks like -- hardly looks like a threat to anyone.

Is the President going to address this in his speech tomorrow? And beyond that, is there any sense of embarrassment in the administration that the three major prongs of a policy haven't, at least as yet, haven't really been --

MR. FLEISCHER: Heavens no, on your last point. And certainly the President has said, and you've heard him say it many times, that we continue to have high confidence that the weapons of mass destruction will be found. Iraq is a regime that was a master at hiding it, and there are thousands and thousands of sites where it could be hidden, and they will be pursued as increasing evidence comes along.

On the ties to al Qaeda, I think that's been well-documented and known. And when you talk about the military threat, they may not have been much of a military threat for our Armed Forces as the war was engaged, but for the neighborhood, they were one powerful military threat, and they proved that by attacking their neighbors multiple times.

Again, tomorrow the President will give the speech, and you'll be able to hear it all in its entirety.

**Q Ari, going back to the Middle East, is there any plan by the President to nominate or name a new Middle East envoy to the peace talks?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Nothing that's crossed my radar.

**Q General Zinni, is he still the Middle East envoy?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Let me try to get an update on that. Nothing has crossed my radar, though.

**Q Ari, back on the judicial nominations, now.** A new controversy may be cropping up because the two Maryland senators are concerned about the Claude Allen nomination. Grant you, they might not have voted for Owen and Estrada anyway, but they're upset about the Claude Allen nomination because he's a Virginian, and they consider that to be a Maryland seat on the 4th Circuit. Does the President have any feeling of obligation to hold to those kinds of gentlemen's agreements?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, we always try to work with various changing types of requests from senators for consideration. And it's a process that we try to work very collegially with the Senate. So we'll just continue to work on behalf of all the President's nominees with all those involved.

**Q Would he not consider that to be a Maryland seat?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Let me take a look at the specifics of it to see if I can offer you more on it.

**Q Back on the road map, isn't the goal to have the first phase completed by next month? And is that really a realistic expectation considering that you're calling for Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian occupied territories?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the framework and the road map does outline certain time periods, the key one being the creation of an independent Palestinian state in 2005 that lives in peace and security with their neighbor, Israel. And all events leading up to that help to support that goal. What's going to happen now is we'll see how actively and how quickly the parties can work together to make all of this happen. We'll see what the exact time table is.

**Q So you're not necessarily firm in the insistence that Israel withdraw by next month?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Today is the beginning of the process. And let's wait and hear how the parties react to it. Let's see what efforts they undertake. And we're going to continue to work with them toward the achievement of those goals.

**Q Was the deadline always the end of May, or was that changed because of the delay in the appointment of Abu Mazen?**

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I don't -- this road map was prepared late last year, and it was released today as is from late last year. But this is where we welcome the contributions from the parties to it.

**Q The visit to the ship tomorrow**, can you describe some of the logistics for us, and tell us if the President is looking forward to or dreading his first carrier landing? (Laughter.)

MR. FLEISCHER: The President is eagerly anticipating this trip. I think he's very excited about the process of being directly with many of the sailors and the Marines who helped make the success of the mission possible. He's also looking forward to addressing the nation from the deck of a moving aircraft carrier. That's a wonderful metaphor for the return of our troops from combat back to their families.

The President will fly out to the aircraft carrier on Navy One, after he departs Air Force One, lands in San Diego and then transfers. And it's a very exciting voyage, a very exciting trip, but nowhere near as exciting as the voyage that the sailors and the Marines are taking, because they're coming home to see their families.

**Q** Obviously, the President's a former pilot. Can you talk about the plane itself and where he's going to be?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President will be sitting in the front seat, next to the pilot of the Navy aircraft. He is a former pilot. For the sake of the landing, I'm sure he will be doing no piloting. (Laughter.) I hope he's not watching today's briefing. (Laughter.)

**Q Ari, two more Colombian journalists** have been assassinated in Colombia. What does the President plan to do to try and restore security in that country?

MR. FLEISCHER: The United States is working directly with the Colombians. And we have a presence in the region authorized by the Congress to help with the narco-terrorist war that the government of Colombia and President Uribe are fighting. The President looks forward to his meeting this evening to talk to President Uribe about the steps that are being taken to fight the terrorism there. And it's important. The people of Colombia have been long -- long been struggling against terrorism there. That's sapping the strength of the country, and they deserve the support of the world.

**Q** The press secretary in Doha says U.S. forces will be leaving Saudi Arabia by the end of the summer. Will this improve U.S.-Saudi relations?

MR. FLEISCHER: Number one, U.S.-Saudi relations are strong. Saudi Arabia is an ally of the United States, has been a partner with the United States. And that is how this President views our relationship with Saudi Arabia. As for any type of military deployments or basing issues, you need to talk to the Department of Defense for the specifics of them. We regularly review and are undergoing currently a review of our deployments worldwide.

**Q I'd like to follow up on my question** from yesterday about reports of French aid to Saddam's regime. Is there anything new on that, or our relationship with France in general?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, on the reports, I've noticed many of these reports, different accounts, some relating to documents that were found in Iraq, and I have nothing to offer on that. I think it's something that the French can answer to explain any relationship. That's for France to address.

**Q** In his Sunday column, Tom Friedman cited the atrocities that occurred in Iraq, and said, "We do not need to find any weapons of mass destruction to justify this war." Does the President agree with that sentiment?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the President is confident that we're going to find weapons of mass destruction. So I think it's not an immediate relevant issue to the President because, based on everything that he knows going into the war, he has continued to express that confidence.

**Q And a follow-up. You've** said earlier that -- he used the word "embarrassed," but you indicated that the President is not concerned that a lot of things have not occurred yet, the finding of the weapons of mass destruction. Yet, there does seem to be a feeling in some places, particularly Europe and some of the Arab countries, that the President may have intentionally deceived the public by overstating the threat posed by the Iraqis. Are you at least concerned that this perception is rising in some areas?

MR. FLEISCHER: The statue fell just three weeks ago. And Saddam Hussein has had some 14 years in which he had worked to hide his weapons of mass destruction, and in particularly the four years when the inspectors were out of the country. And so, no, this is not a serious issue or a credible issue. This is an issue that will be addressed over time, and with confidence, because it will be found.

**Q Ari, you talked about Yasser Arafat** and the President's view that he was an impediment for peace. Under the road map, what future is envisioned for Yasser Arafat?

MR. FLEISCHER: The future envisioned for the road map is for the Palestinian people and the Israeli people. And there's a place for all those who will live in peace, and the work to be done by those who believe in peace will be done by others, because he had his chance, he failed to take that chance to lead the way for peace.

**Q** His day is done?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think that you can refer to what the President said on June 24th, 2002 about his role.

**Q Can I just ask you about the speech tomorrow, Ari?** You said he's not going to say the war is over, but is there not some element of victory inherent in his speech?

MR. FLEISCHER: You know, I've gone probably as far as I can go this far in advance of a speech. The President will address it in its entirety tomorrow.

**Q** On Iraq, how are you assessing the validity of the statements by Tariq Aziz regarding Saddam Hussein, and regarding Scott Speicher? And do you have any theory on the whereabouts of Baghdad Bob?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I'm not going to comment on any of the reports about what we are hearing in the course of our interrogations. Just as a matter of policy, this is not something that we discuss. And Baghdad Bob -- which Baghdad Bob? (Laughter.)

**Q** The one that wants to replace you if he gets a chance. He's the Information Minister in Iraq.

MR. FLEISCHER: Oh, I wasn't aware. No, I don't -- I have not heard anything other than the President's flavorful description of him.

**Q** What do you see as the impact of Hamas' rejection of the road map and the latest suicide bombing on prospects for what you described as a new and more optimistic environment? How can such an environment take hold in that kind of an atmosphere?



MR. FLEISCHER: This is the very challenge that the parties face. Hamas, violence, homicide attacks, and the other terrorist groups that operate in the region are the greatest challenge to peace there is. And this is why it's so imperative for the Palestinian people to join together and say that if they want to be a state, if they want a bright, peaceful future, security has got to be brought under control, and these groups have got to be brought under control. Because this type of terrorism is a setback to the cause of the Palestinian people, and a setback to statehood. And that is one of the biggest sources of trouble and concern.

And so, security becomes very quickly an important point in events on the ground and the ability of Israelis and Palestinians to work arrangements and work agreements. The President will continue to fight for this. And it's important now for the Palestinian Authority to take every step possible and to crack down so these type of terrorist attacks cannot be repeated.

Q Do you think this emerging government has a capacity to bring them under control?

MR. FLEISCHER: They certainly, per the Oslo Agreement, per statements that have been made, and per a sense of desire for peace, have an obligation to take every step in that direction, yes.

**Q A different topic. The tobacco treaty at the U.N., the U.S. wants some changes to it that critics say will weaken it significantly. What's the administration's --**

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, this is this is -- if ever there was an issue involving standard language in treaties, this is it. We wanted to be a signatory to this treaty. We have made clear that we want to sign it, we want to ratify it. The language here deals with what's called the reservations clause, which is a standard procedure in treaties. And this reservation -- the reservation clause simply prohibits signatories from making reservations of sections of the treaty. Reservations is a standard part of treaties. So you really haven't seen anything different in our approach to this treaty. It is a treaty we want to sign, we want to ratify with the standard language.

Q I have a question regarding the French papers reporting on chemical weapons in Iraq. They are saying that so far there is nothing there, and the troops there want to find anything. And if they find something, the French media is saying the CIA has -- is going to put it there. Do you have any response to this kind of --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, just again, I've addressed here earlier, the President has high confidence that it will be found. A mere three weeks after the fall of the statue, it's unreasonable to expect that a decade of Saddam Hussein's ability to deceive and to deny and to build up a giant infrastructure built to hide, can be pierced in three weeks time. Again, Secretary Armitage addressed this at some length this morning.

**Q Ari, now that we're entering phase two in the Iraqi situation, what is the United States' position on the United Nations and NGOs taking a stronger, or more up-front role in the reconstruction process? Do we still want to have the major say?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, as a technical matter, it's referred to as phase four. Phase three was the military phase. Phase two was the lead-up phase. I don't remember what phase one was. (Laughter.) But the President believes that the United Nations should have a vital role in reconstruction efforts in Iraq and the humanitarian relief programs in Iraq. And that's important. The United Nations is a major representative to the deliberations inside Iraq.

And I would note that USAID in its granting of contracts, is granting contracts to NGOs who are helping to improve the security situation and the humanitarian situation inside Iraq.

Q Ari, will we defer to the United Nations, though, in terms of what projects to pursue and all that, given the fact that they never supported the war?

MR. FLEISCHER: The lead will continue to be the coalition with the help of all those who want to play a constructive role, including the United Nations.

Q The Washington Post quoted the Associated Press' corporate spokesman, Jack Stokes, in New York as saying with regard to their interview of Senator Santorum, "Any of our reporter's marital status has nothing to do with their stories." And my question is, do you, as the President's chief media spokesman, believe that there would be no conflict of interest seen if AP hired that brilliant writer Lynne Cheney to be their White House Bureau Chief, or to cover Senator Kerry's campaign?

MR. FLEISCHER: Lester, I think these are matters that the media wrestles with, and it's appropriate to let them handle it, not the White House spokesman.

Q The Council on American-Islamic Relations has asked the President to rescind the nomination of Dr. Daniel Pipes to the U.S. Institute of Peace. Does the White House regard this organization with enough respect to withdraw Dr. Pipes' nomination?

MR. FLEISCHER: The nomination continues to stand.

**Q Ari, North Korea has mentioned any intervention** attempted by the United Nations with North Korea nuclear issues will be regarded as a prelude to the war. What is your comment?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, that's, frankly, absolutely nothing new for North Korea. North Korea has had a history of saying inflammatory statements. In fact, they said that very statement on -- in 1994. So this is a pattern that North Korea has about engaging in rather hot rhetoric, and it does not contribute to advancing the cause for peace on the Peninsula.

**Q Does the President view his speech tomorrow night** as an opportunity to inform the nation about -- specifically about the future course of the war on terrorism, and exactly what his intentions might be towards the other members of the axis of evil?

MR. FLEISCHER: Let me just repeat what I said earlier. The President will talk about the ongoing war against terrorism in his speech tomorrow night.

Thank you.

END 1:19 P.M. EDT